

Mod 13 — ORIGINAL SIN—OR ORIGINAL GRACE?

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What about babies—when they are conceived, while in the womb, at birth? Are they under law, or under grace? This question is actually raised and answered in Romans 5:12-19, where Adam's sin is contrasted with Christ's cross. The issue being settled here is simply this: which of these is stronger? Which prevails over the other?

At least since the time of Augustine (d. A.D. 430), the Christian world has tended to focus on what this text says about Adam more than what it says about Christ. Most see it as teaching the doctrine of ORIGINAL SIN. What does this phrase mean? It does not refer to an act, i.e., it does not refer to Adam and Eve's first sin. "Original sin" means a *condition*, the spiritual condition in which children are conceived and born. How is this condition understood, and what does it have to do with Adam? In fact, IS there such a thing as "original sin"?

First, how do we know that this text is even referring to little children? Basically because of vv. 12-14. Here Paul says Adam's sin causes all to die, "because ALL sinned" (aorist/past tense), EVEN "those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam." The best understanding here is that the fact that sometimes even babies die is not because they sinned personally but because they sinned *representatively* in Adam in the Garden of Eden. (See my Commentary on Romans on these verses.)

Thus when Adam sinned, he was acting for all of us, as our representative. The question then is, how did this sin affect the entire human race? On a practical level, what is at stake here is the status of children when they are conceived and born. Do children come into existence in a state called "original sin"? Does the "death" brought upon all by Adam's sin include spiritual and eternal death?

I. THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN.

We will remember that sin causes two main problems (the "double curse"): the legal problem of guilt and condemnation to hell, and the spiritual condition of sinfulness or depravity. The earliest views of some form of original sin arose around A.D. 200, when some Christians began to believe that babies come into existence with a (partially) sinful, depraved nature. This view was later called "semi-Pelagianism," and some still hold to it. (This was Alexander Campbell's belief. See his *Christian System*, chapters 5-7.) It is a rather weak view of original sin.

It was Augustine who developed the full-fledged doctrine of original sin. He said babies come into existence not just partially depraved but **TOTALLY** depraved, meaning that they have no free will to accept any offer of salvation that might come to them later on. But that's not all. He also said that babies come into existence bearing the full guilt and condemnation of Adam's sin, and are thus bound for hell (unless they can be baptized). This complete doctrine of original sin

was accepted by the major Reformers in the 16th century, and is still a central idea in Lutheranism and Calvinism.

This doctrine is tied in with Romans 5:12-19 because this text says all DIE because of Adam's sin, and this "death" seems to include not just physical death but also spiritual death (total depravity) and eternal death (condemnation to hell). Verse 15 says that the one man's sin brought death (of all kinds) to "the many." ("Many" in this passage is not being contrasted with "all," but with "one." It refers to the entire human race.) Verse 16 says the one sin brought judgment and condemnation, which must refer to eternity in hell. Verse 17 says "death reigned" through the one man. Verse 18 says the one sin brought "condemnation to all men." Verse 19 says that "through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners."

The fact is that *Paul does say that all these things are brought on the whole human race because of Adam's sin!* Now what? What is the solution to this horrendous legacy of Adam? Defenders of original sin have suggested two ways that infants can be set free from this condition. The first and earliest solution was INFANT BAPTISM. In fact, this is why infant baptism was originally introduced, at the same time as ideas of original sin arose (c. A.D. 200). Augustine solidified this view; it was adopted by Roman Catholicism and later by Lutherans. (Most others baptize babies for other reasons, as originated by Huldreich Zwingli in the 1520s, even if they believe in original sin.)

The second answer to setting babies free from original sin is found mainly in Calvinism, namely, PREDESTINATION. I.e., all those whom God unconditionally predestines to be saved will be delivered from original sin whenever God chooses to do so (unconnected with baptism).

Neither of these solutions is acceptable. For one thing, both of them offer just a partial solution to the problem of original sin: only SOME infants are baptized, and only SOME are predestined to be saved (in these views). But this simply does not do justice to what Paul is saying here ABOUT JESUS CHRIST, and his ORIGINAL GRACE.

II. THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL GRACE.

The doctrine of original sin as described above misses the whole point of Romans 5:12-19. True, Paul does say that death, condemnation, and sin come upon ALL HUMAN BEINGS because of Adam's sin. But that is only part of what he says, and it is not even his main point. We need to focus on "the rest of the story" (as Paul Harvey used to say), which is this: *The clear teaching of Romans 5:12-19 is that the one act of redemption by the one man Jesus Christ not only wipes away ALL the effects of Adam's sin, but MUCH MORE* (vv. 15, 17). Thus Paul is NOT teaching the doctrine of original sin, but rather what we may call THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL GRACE.

Paul's point is simply this: WHATEVER came upon (or WOULD have come upon) the entire race as infants as a result of Adam's sin, HAS BEEN REMOVED for the entire race as the result of the saving work of Jesus Christ and by the universal gift of saving grace. Thus when we think of the spiritual condition in which infants are conceived and born, we should think of them as being born NOT in original sin, but in the state of original grace.

The same verses in Romans 5 (vv. 15-19) that say all human beings got sin-consequences from Adam, say even more adamantly that all human beings got salvation-consequences from Christ. The latter completely cancel out the former. Verse 15 says all get death from Adam, but all get grace and the gift (of life) from Christ. (For babies who die, this is a guarantee of their future redemptive resurrection from the dead.) Verses 16 and 18 say all get condemnation from Adam, but all get justification from Christ. Verse 17 says all get death from Adam, but all get grace, righteousness, and life from Christ. Verse 19 says all are made sinners by Adam, but made righteous by Christ.

All of these blessings of original grace have been applied to all descendants of Adam, even from the beginning, even before the cross became an actual historical event. Were it not for God's "predetermined plan" (Acts 2:23) to send Jesus to the cross, thanks to Adam all babies WOULD have come into existence in original sin: sinful, guilty, and condemned. But instead, because of Christ, all babies come into existence in the state of original grace: pure, free, and innocent. This is true of all babies, not just some supposed "elect" and not just those "baptized." It is universal and automatic. (It does not result in universal salvation, since original grace erases only the results of ADAM'S sin, not the results of our own personal sins. Sins consciously committed can be removed only by grace consciously accepted when one hears the gospel.)

Here is how I think of babies and young children. When they come into existence, they enter into a world governed by law; but they themselves are wrapped in a cocoon of grace. As a result they are under the grace system, not the law system, until they reach the age of accountability. At that point the cocoon of grace dissolves, and the children are now responsible for their own personal sins and are under the law system. Now they need to hear and respond to the gospel to be saved from the consequences of their personal sins. If they accept the gospel they receive the gift of personal grace (the "much more" of vv. 15, 17).

To sum it up, the individual's spiritual odyssey begins with a theoretical original sin, which is canceled by Christ's original grace, which is (at the age of accountability) canceled by personal sin, which may then be covered by personal grace.